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Pretrial hearing for accused spy closed to public to protect secrets

By Bill Gertz
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Former CIA translator Larry Wu-Tai Chin, an alleged mole for the Communist Chinese intelligence service, is scheduled to stand trial tomorrow on espionage and tax charges related to an alleged spying career that began more than 30 years ago.

Mr. Chin made a secret appearance Friday in U.S. District Court in Alexandria during a hearing held under the Classified Information Procedures Act, court officials said.

The 1980 Act prevents defendants' use of "graymail" — the threat to publicize classified information unless prosecutors drop or alter a case — and allows judges to close court sessions in order to examine secret documents relevant to cases.

In California, a federal judge Friday postponed for a week the espionage trial of accused Soviet spy Jerry A. Whitworth, the last defendant in the Walker family and friends espionage case.

And Air Force authorities in California have provided the first details on the alleged spy activities of Airman 1st Class Bruce D. Ott, who was arrested Jan. 22 for attempting to sell secrets about the SR-71 photo-reconnaissance plane to FBI agents posing as Soviet officials.

Mr. Chin's Friday hearing lasted about 45 minutes and was the second hearing closed under the Classified Procedures Act.

A former CIA translator and contract employee, Mr. Chin was indicted Jan. 2 on 17 counts of espionage, conspiracy, tax evasion and failing to report financial transactions.

His trial is expected to begin tomorrow on charges he spied for Communist China for more than 30 years. If convicted on all charges, Mr. Chin faces up to two life terms in prison, plus 47 years, and fines totaling more than \$2.5 million.

Prosecutors in the case have said Mr. Chin admitted to spying during a six-hour interview with FBI agents last Nov. 22. He offered to operate as a "double agent" for the United

States before revealing details of how he met Chinese intelligence officers in Hong Kong, Peking and Toronto.

Federal authorities have described the case as one of the most serious espionage affairs because the case spanned over three decades.

Mr. Chin retired from the CIA's Foreign Broadcast Information Service in 1981 and continued translating documents as a contract employee for the agency's Joint Publications Research Service until the time of his arrest, according to court papers.

He held top secret security clearances, could have compromised the identities of U.S. covert intelligence operatives, and was aware of the CIA's intelligence collection priorities against China, the papers stated.

Among the information allegedly passed to the Chinese were reports on U.S. intelligence assessments of China between 1976 and 1981, in exchange for an estimated \$140,000 and details on Chinese prisoners of war during the Korean war.

Details of Mr. Chin's extensive real estate holdings — reported to be worth more than \$700,000 — are expected to be used by prosecutors in the case as evidence of Mr. Chin's alleged failure to report certain funds to the U.S. government.

Mr. Chin retired from the CIA in 1981 when he reportedly earned about \$44,000.

FBI agent Mark R. Johnson said he had been involved in the Chin investigation since December 1983, but few facts have emerged about how federal authorities were alerted to Mr. Chin's alleged spying activities.

Meanwhile in San Francisco, Federal Judge John P. Vakusin ruled last week that prosecutors in the Whitworth case must supply defense attorneys with transcripts of 266 FBI interviews with witnesses expected to be called to appear in the trial.

Judge Vakusin postponed the trial previously scheduled to being Feb.

10 until an undecided date the following week. The scheduling delay was caused by a jury trial already in progress.

Prosecutors submitted a list of 373 proposed witnesses and defense attorneys listed 60 potential witnesses.

At Beale Air Force Base near Sacramento, Calif., Air Force spokesman Capt. Joseph Saxon said yesterday that Airman Ott has been charged with four offenses under the Uniform Code of Military Justice for contacting Soviet officials without notifying military authorities, two charges of attempting to deliver national defense documents to Soviet officials, and one charge of stealing classified documents.

"Airman Ott has not yet been recommended for court-martial," Capt. Saxon said in a telephone interview, adding that the investigation is continuing.

If convicted by a general court-martial, the maximum sentence under a newly enacted military espionage statute is the death penalty or life imprisonment, Capt. Saxon said.

One of the documents Airman Ott allegedly tried to sell contained regulations for Air Force crewmen entitled "SAC Tactical Doctrine: SR-71 Crews." Another document was described as a "unit roster" containing the names of SR-71 crew members.

A squadron of SR-71s is stationed at Beale Air Force Base. The SR-71, known as the "Blackbird" is capable of taking photographs while flying at altitudes of 80,000 feet and at speeds of 2,000 miles per hour. Its features and specifications are tightly guarded secrets.